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ABSTRACT

Women with past or present careers in outdoor leadership were asked to suggest strategies by which outdoor and experiential education programs could increase the number of women employed in the field, and support women in becoming even more successful in their careers. The 25 women interviewed ranged in age from 22 to 44, had 1-25 years experience in outdoor careers, and included program administrators and instructors. Ten suggested strategies are discussed, with interview excerpts and examples. The strategies are: (1) hire and promote more women into administrative and executive positions; (2) offer advanced skills training in single-gender environments; (3) commit to equal opportunity, affirmative action, and other non-discriminatory hiring policies; (4) actively recruit and encourage women to apply for outdoor leadership positions; (5) educate staff and participants about gender issues; (6) increase the number of female participants by offering single-gender programs for women and girls and by using new marketing approaches; (7) create an organizational climate that is appealing to women; (8) assist in the creation of networking and support systems for female outdoor leaders, both within and between organizations; (9) recognize women's achievements in and contributions to the field of outdoor leadership; and (10) assist women in balancing work with family and relationship commitments. (SV)

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Leading the Way: Strategies That Enhance Women's Involvement in Experiential Education Careers

T.A. Loeffler

ED 412 042

Introduction

I probably should have been a career counselor. Ever since grade school, I can remember helping classmates sort out the answer to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It seems natural that when I finally chose a dissertation topic it focused on career development (Loeffler, 1995). I was fortunate to combine my love of career counseling with that of my other love, outdoor leadership. Reflecting on my own career in outdoor leadership, I realized that I had several questions and sought to find answers to them by doing extensive research. I learned a great deal about women's career development in the past year. I had the privilege of interviewing 25 women about their careers in outdoor leadership. I heard many voices telling rich stories of challenge, success, struggle, and growth. I shared much laughter and some tears with the women as they spoke. Five of the women in the study were field instructors, five were program administrators, five were college instructors, five were executive directors, and five women had left the field of outdoor leadership. The women ranged in age from 22 to 44, and they ranged in years of experience from one to 25.

As part of the research process, I asked each woman to suggest strategies for outdoor organizations, strategies that outdoor and experiential education organizations could implement to support women in becoming even more successful in their careers and to increase the number of women employed in the field of experiential education. This chapter highlights and illustrates the women's answers to that particular question. Table 1 contains a summary of the strategies. It is my hope that these women's voices will be heard and that these strategies will be put into action at outdoor organizations around the world.

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Table 1
Potential Strategies for Supporting Women's Career Development

Hire and promote more women into administrative and executive positions. Develop a management training program for women. Develop formal and informal mentoring programs for women at all levels within outdoor organizations.
Offer advanced skills training in single-gender environments. Single-gender training allows women to learn in a safe and nurturing environment where they feel more comfortable taking risks. Provide a wide variety of professional development opportunities.
Commit to equal opportunity, affirmative action, and other non-discriminatory hiring policies. Value people skills as highly as technical skills when hiring. Adopt a sexual harassment policy and strongly enforce it. Provide training in sexual harassment prevention. Pay men and women equally for equal work. Provide a livable salary.
Actively recruit and encourage women to apply for outdoor leadership positions. Set up recruiting networks between organizations. Provide scholarships for women to attend instructor training programs.
Educate staff and participants about gender issues. Provide training in gender-issue resolution for staff. Provide assertiveness training for female staff. Support increased diversity awareness and sensitivity in all program areas.
Increase the number of female participants by offering single-gender programs for women and girls and by using new marketing approaches. Outdoor programs for girls will provide opportunities for interest, skill, and self-esteem building. Gender-sensitive marketing will attract more women and girls to attend outdoor programs.
Create an organizational climate that is appealing to women. Reduce bravado and macho-ness in programs. Focus on curriculum and work environment which provides support, is free of harassment, and dispels stereotypical roles of women and men.
Assist in the creation of networking and support systems for female outdoor leaders, both within and between organizations. Encourage the formation of a national women's outdoor organization. Give women the opportunity to work with other women.
Recognize women's achievements in and contributions to the field of outdoor leadership. Publish books and articles by women authors and about women's accomplishments in the outdoors. Assist women in becoming recognized and visible in national organizations.
Assist women in balancing work with family and relationship commitments. Provide daycare, staff housing that works for families, parental leave, courses where children can go along with parents, and flexible scheduling options to support parents. Allow partners to work courses together or have field times that coincide.

Hire and Promote More Women into Administrative and Executive Positions

This strategy was mentioned by the vast majority of the women in the study. These women believed that having more women in administrative and executive positions would effect change in at least three ways. Firstly, according to one of the women, "If more women get into more leadership roles, then you don't have as much of the old boys network." Additionally, a second woman thought that "hiring a greater number of administrators who are female will draw and keep more women." Another woman suggested that outdoor organizations develop management training programs where women could be taught the necessary skills to be successful at the administrative level.

Secondly, an increase in the number of women at administrative and executive levels would increase the number of available female role models and mentors. Ninety-four percent of the women said that it is extremely important for women to have strong, female role models and mentors. "Mentoring was really crucial for me, having someone to say 'you'd be good at that so why don't you work toward it' made all the difference in my career success," is how one woman described the role that mentoring had on her career. Another woman outlined her ideas about mentoring in outdoor leadership:

> Women need to take on being role models and mentors. This is one of the jobs we have as women. Not only do I train outdoor leaders but I must be a role model for women so they know it is possible. I think it is the responsibility of any woman who has made it in the field to act as a role model and mentor for up and coming women.

Thirdly, three of the interviewees thought that an increase in the number of women in positions of power would cause a "paradigm shift," whereby organizational structures would become less hierarchical, more accessible, more humanistic, and more nurturing. They believed that this paradigm shift would enable outdoor organizations to hire and retain more women.

Offer Advanced Skills Training in Single-Gender Environments

Many of the women in the study suggested that single-gender training opportunities allow women to learn new skills in a safe and nurturing environment. When women feel more comfortable, they are often more willing to take risks of either a physical or emotional nature. Since many outdoor leadership skills require women to act outside traditional gender roles, a single-gender group can provide support and opportunity to push beyond previously held limits.

"There has to be advocating for women-only space, a place where women learn from women," one woman summarized. A long-time field instructor noticed that when female instructor candidates were allowed to learn rock climbing in a single-gender environment, "they finally learned they were already competent and as a result, they were more willing to jump out during their instructor's course at the same level as their male counterparts—they no longer held themselves back fearing they weren't good enough." One of the administrators interviewed believed that "women need the leg up to develop technical skills and access to skill acquisition without always having to fight the same old battles of sexism. There is a dire need to embrace all-women trainings." Another woman noticed that the women she worked with liked learning new outdoor skills in a formalized setting rather than "just going out and doing it on their own." She advocated that outdoor organizations provide lots of professional development opportunities, both mixed-gender and single-gender, to assist women in furthering both their skill base and overall career development.

Commit to Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Other Nondiscriminatory Hiring Policies

Women in the study noticed that the application process in outdoor organizations tends to emphasize technical skill competence at the expense of human interaction skills. Several people believed that outdoor organizations need to value and balance these two competency areas when hiring, both to increase staff competence and to increase the number of women they employ. One interviewee described how her organization had implemented this strategy:

> Because we value lots of different kinds of experience, we've broken the application process down into parts so it doesn't look so foreboding. This makes it possible for more women to apply. Also, we've coupled intense internships and trainings with the first year of someone's employment.

Some women tended to stress hiring policies such as equal opportunity and affirmative action as strategies for helping women be more successful in their outdoor leadership careers; whereas other women stressed correcting pay inequities, increasing salaries, and providing quality benefits as strategies to help women to be more successful.

Actively Recruit and Encourage Women to Apply for Outdoor Leadership Positions

Several of the women mentioned the value of being recruited and/or encouraged by an outdoor organization. "I would never have thought about applying to the instructor's course until they sent me the application. I didn't think I was

qualified enough," is how one woman described how a recruitment program got her career started. Another woman values her organization's commitment to recruiting women staff members:

> My organization is doing a great job of encouraging women right now. We track talented female students from our courses and encourage them to apply for staff positions. We provide all-women training seminars and then provide mentoring over the length of their careers with us.

In addition, several women mentioned how scholarships had helped them acquire outdoor leadership skills. These women thought scholarships and other forms of financial assistance would aid women in becoming more successful in their careers by giving them greater access to training in outdoor leadership skills.

Educate Staff and Participants about Gender Issues

"I've found that in-house trainings which bring up gender issues in a nonconfrontational way are hugely beneficial," is how one woman described this strategy. Another suggested that "gender-related issues and needs must be an important part of an organization's agenda and mission rather than waiting to see if something comes up." Assertiveness training for female staff was recommended by two program administrators because they felt that such training assists women in dealing with "macho" co-workers. Finally, several program administrators advocated for awareness and education for all diversity issues facing outdoor organizations.

Increase the Number of Female Participants by Offering Single-Gender Programs for Women and Girls

Many of the women interviewed suggested that it is valuable for girls and women to have both mixed-gender and single-gender outdoor experiences. Since the majority of organized outdoor experiences for adults are currently mixed-gender, they advocated for increasing the number of single-gender options available. As previously mentioned, single-gender outdoor courses may provide greater learning opportunities for women. In such environments, women may be able to gain a more accurate sense of their interests and abilities. These women believe that as the number of female outdoor participants increases, there will be a parallel gain in the number of female outdoor leaders.

Another group of women advocated for increasing the number of outdoor program options available for girls. One woman, a founder of a single-gender outdoor program for girls said the following:

> Self-confidence building is a thing that needs to start at an early age for girls. We need to increase the number of organized outdoor programs available

> for girls so their self-esteem can be salvaged before and as it gets thrashed by adolescence.

"As more girls participate in outdoor programs, more will become aware of outdoor leadership as a career option. We need to let girls and young women know this is a work option that they can choose," declared one long-time field instructor.

Increase the Number of Female Participants by Using New Marketing Approaches

Many interviewees mentioned redesigning marketing and promotion materials as a strategy for assisting women's career development in outdoor leadership. They thought the number of female participants could be increased through marketing that was designed to appeal to women and that made outdoor activities seem accessible to women. One program administrator mentioned that "marketing is huge." Her organization is very conscious about good gender representation in all of its brochures and photos. She believes it is very important for women to see images of women doing outdoor activities. She concluded by saying, "Only when an individual woman can see herself in the [brochure] picture, can she imagine signing up for a course." Another woman said that organizations need to examine the language in their marketing materials to see if it portrays their programs in a way that appeals to women. Finally, it is important for outdoor programs to advertise their courses in a broad spectrum of media that women read and see in order to expand their current reach beyond outdoor magazines.

Create an Organizational Climate that is Appealing to Women

According to many of the women, outdoor organizations can create a climate that is appealing to women. One female program administrator expressed her opinion: "Outdoor organizations need to ask women what they need and then try their hardest to provide it." She went on to say, that for her, she was looking for an organizational climate that was supportive, free from harassment and oppressive "machoness," and allowed people to step outside traditional roles and stereotypes.

During their interviews, several women mentioned that the "macho" elements or values present in outdoor leadership "turn them off." They wished the "conquering spirit" and other war-like metaphors could be removed from their programs' ambiance. One woman described how her organization made such a shift:

> I think [organization name] is farthest along in putting a value on the process, the context, the relationship rather than having something to prove or conquer. We've been working with our physical aspects of our program to

> set a norm that is healthy and accessible for everyone such as using two-person portage lifts for canoes and single pack carries across portages.

Another woman described how instructors in her program now teach rock climbing: "We've shifted the emphasis when we teach rock climbing. We try to find initial climbs that favor balance and grace rather than upper body strength because such climbs encourage women's success."

Assist in the Creation of Networking and Support Systems for Female Outdoor Leaders, Both Within and Between Organizations

Many of the interviewees spoke of the value of professional and support networks they had set up for themselves. They also shared the difficulties of maintaining these networks during transitory times. Many of the women used their professional networks for information about career options and movement, political and organizational reform ideas, and overall professional development. "We need networks so we have someone to bounce ideas off of and someone to turn to when the times get rough," said one woman.

Some of the women interviewed wanted a new, national women's outdoor organization to be formed. Others believed that every female outdoor leader should be a member of one of the mixed-gender professional organizations that already exist. It was suggested that outdoor organizations pay the membership costs for any staff member who wished to belong to a professional organization. Two women proposed that a national women outdoor leaders conference be held every two years so women can come together to learn from and support each other. Finally, many women suggested that women instructors be allowed to work together frequently, even if it means that some other courses only have male instructors, as a way of building support networks and confidence in their professional abilities.

The value of support networks was also mentioned by many of the interviewees. They used support groups or close friends within an organization to lend assistance during harder times that were either professional or personal. Since it can be difficult to maintain support networks while leading a field-based existence, several women suggested that outdoor organizations help set up formal or semi-formal support systems for their staff.

Recognize Women's Achievements in and Contributions to the Field of Outdoor Leadership

Several interviewees had very strong feelings about this particular strategy. They called for women's achievements and contributions to the field of outdoor

leadership to be recognized. One woman said that it was time for female outdoor leaders to reclaim their history:

> We need to acknowledge and recognize the contributions that women have already made to the field of outdoor leadership. Women's contributions have been co-opted. And I don't mean co-opted in a vicious and stealing way, but in a subtly sexist way. A lot of the contributions that originally came from women's programs have become part of the field and no one knows or acknowledges where they came from. Women have had a strong influence on how the whole field has become more open to diversity, more cooperative, less competitive, more gentle, and more process-oriented. This movement has come from women's voices in the field and is not recognized. We need to rewrite that history.

It was also suggested that outdoor organizations assist their female staff in becoming visible and recognized in national organizations. "I think we need to get more women into positions where they can influence the outdoor leadership field as a whole," declared one of the interviewees.

Another strategy that was mentioned for women to become both influential and visible is through writing and publication. Several women suggested that outdoor organizations make a concerted effort to highlight female staff within organizational publications and to publish the writing of female authors more frequently. Another woman hoped several more anthologies of women's outdoor experiences[1] would be published in the near future. She thought these anthologies were valuable tools for women's career development because they give women a powerful voice in the outdoor literature and provide quality images of women outdoors that may inspire other women to adventure and lead.

Assist Women in Balancing Work with Family and Relationship Commitments

According to most of the interviewees, there is a real need for recognition on the part of outdoor organizations that outdoor leadership is a long-term career choice for many staff. Outdoor organizations need to grapple with the same family issues as the rest of the corporate world: child care, parental leave, and quality-of-life issues. One interviewee suggested that outdoor organizations "make field positions saner so that people can have their lives, outside the field, work. This will improve the environment for everyone and will make it more inviting to women." A frequent question that arose during the interviews was: "Why can't outdoor organizations restructure how they hire staff so there are more full-time positions where staff can make a living wage and raise a family at a normal age?" Another woman offered her opinion:

> Unless outdoor organizations change their staffing philosophies, this field is never going to be that attractive to people that have debt, families, or children. It is really hard to deal with these things which means the field has a lot of single people. The more that organizations encourage relationships and families and help people make a living, the more women are going to stay. Organizations need to pay more attention to people in partnerships being on the same courses together, or starting and ending together. This will assist women in staying in outdoor careers longer.

Several women advocated for job sharing and other flexible scheduling arrangements to assist women in balancing work and family commitments.

One woman believed that outdoor programs needed to rethink how they structure courses because the current structure does not support staff with families or primary relationships. She related her experience of working at an outdoor program in Britain:

> At the program, 90% of the staff were married and most have kids at the normal times, and we still ran 21 day courses out there. The courses were more base site oriented than U.S. courses are, but I don't think it was any less of an outdoor experience. The base camp situation made it so that when you were in camp, people were able to go home at night because there would be mass first aid sessions and two instructors would be responsible for 125 students. It was do-able. The rest of the people got to go home to their spouses and they had decent family housing. It worked.

Another woman mentioned that she was drawn to outdoor organizations that have a strong sense of community. She thought this sense of community was improved by the organization providing quality housing for the entire season, not just transitional housing. She described the housing situation provided by her current employer:

> At [organization name], you have housing for the entire season, a space that is yours and your stuff is there. No one else is sleeping there. You share it, but it feels like home and it really helps over the long-haul.

It was mentioned by several women that "the world" doesn't understand their careers. One woman thought outdoor organizations needed to educate the general public about the value of the outdoor leadership profession and the reality of the work load. She explained that most of her friends think she has "the most wonderful job in the world and it must be great to get paid to play." She finds it hard to explain to them the enormous responsibility and work load she carries and she wishes her organization would assist people in understanding the demanding nature of the profession. Finally, a program administrator suggested that outdoor organizations examine "what they are accepting as givens," because she believed a few changes could make outdoor careers easier to manage for everyone.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted many potential strategies for outdoor leadership organizations to adopt to assist women in being more successful in their careers. As experiential education enters the next millennium, it is imperative that experiential education organizations address the career and life development needs of women in order to ensure the viable continuation of this valuable education process.

This is only an initial list of strategies. I encourage every outdoor organization to ask their female staff members to generate their own list of strategies. Asking this and other questions gives women an opportunity to speak and have their voices be heard, and it begins the process of change. This process will also result in a list of strategies that will be specific to a particular organization. It is my belief and hope that with these and other strategies in place, women's career development in outdoor and experiential education can and will soar to new heights.

Endnote

[1] See the following references for more information: da Silva (1992); Galland (1980); La Bastille (1980); Lewis (1992).

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